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## Photo Essay: Anonymous Among Us - Images from a New England Potter's Field

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# Anonymous Among Us: Images from a New England Potter's Field

Karen Callan

What began as a trip to a Taunton cemetery to photograph some intriguing grave markers grew into a two-year-plus endeavor that continues to draw me back for yet another look, and yet another round of photos.

From the street, the site appears to be populated by row after row of neatly aligned, rusted markers, all the same size and design, almost lollipop-like in their shape. On approach, rows of a second style of marker—round, flat and flush with the ground—are as prominent and as uniform. Viewed up close, however, each is unique, having suffered the ravages of time and the New England weather. They're broken and cracked and some, barely visible, overgrown with plants and grass. But, what they all have in common is that none bears a name, only numbers.

The site, part of Mayflower Hill Cemetery, is a potter's field, also known as a pauper's cemetery. In the Taunton Cemetery Department's record books, the location is labeled the "free grounds." In use from 1862-1962, this part of the cemetery is the final resting place for many of the region's less fortunate of all ages and backgrounds: city residents and immigrants; stillborn babies, young children, and the elderly; domestics, laborers, and transients; as well as a large number of patients from Taunton State Hospital. Among those buried here is one of Massachusetts most notorious serial killers, Jane Toppan, who confessed to killing 31 people and, after her 1901 arrest, spent the rest of her life in the hospital.

According to the cemetery department's well-preserved record books, the number of markers at the free grounds is 1,015, but the number of deceased buried beneath them is much higher. Many plots hold multiple bodies, often

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several young children and babies. In some locations, babies were buried with unrelated adults to make the best use of the spaces. Over time, some individuals were removed to other cemeteries and their empty plots filled with the newly deceased. In a few cases, the original markers have been replaced with more traditional headstones bearing the names of those once buried unidentified underneath.

After reading page after page of death listings in the record books, I began connecting the numbered markers in my photos with the names on the pages. Like those buried in other parts of the cemetery beneath traditional headstones bearing their names, each person in the free grounds had a story. They had families and friends. They worked

hard and sought better lives. They battled debilitating illnesses, both mental and physical, and parents mourned babies and young children for whom they had hopes and dreams.

Just as the memories of how people of this era lived and died are fading, so, too, are their grave markers. Over time each has developed distinct characteristics, which I've come to see as symbolic of the individuality of those buried beneath.

The photographs that follow are portraits of a sort in which I've tried to capture that sense of individuality before both our memories of the less fortunate of earlier days and the physical remnants commemorating them are gone forever.



*Karen Callan is Assistant Director for University Publications at Bridgewater State. These photographs and others appear in her book-length photo essay Anonymous Among Us: Images from a New England Potter's Field (2011) (published with support from the Taunton Cultural Council).*



























